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VASE IN CHICAGO REPRESENTING THE  
MADNESS OF ATHAMAS

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[PLATE IV]

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THE vase which forms the subject of the present paper is now in the Art Institute of Chicago. I owe my knowledge of this vase to Professor Tarbell, who first showed me a photograph of it, and afterward was so kind as to suggest that I should publish it in this *Journal*. The vase is a large *celebe*, or crater with columnar handles (*vaso a colonnette*); it belongs to a class of very fine vases that must be dated between the time of the Persian wars and the middle of the fifth century; a rather earlier example of the same class is the magnificent Harrow vase published by me in the *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, vol. XVII, pl. vi. Like that vase, it has in its obverse panel a mythological scene of great interest and originality and of admirable execution; while its reverse panel has simply a conventional scene of no particular interest or merit, — in this case merely three standing draped figures (*Mantelfiguren*). Professor Tarbell informs me that the vase is unbroken and shows no signs of repainting. There are traces in various parts of the preliminary sketch with a blunt point (*Vorzeichnung*).

The principal panel is bordered at the top by a row of bars, at the sides by two rows of dots between lines, — a simplification of the ivy wreath. It contains a group of three figures. In the centre is a man striding to his right, his left toe just touching the ground; he throws back his body violently to his right, and his head also is thrown back so as to look upwards; the attitude is evidently one of extreme ecstasy or frenzy; his hair



A VASE IN CHICAGO REPRESENTING THE MADNESS OF ATHAMAS

is rough and dishevelled. He is nude, but for a greave on his right shin and another on his left arm; his left arm is extended and holds an upraised sword; in his lowered right hand is a winged thunderbolt. He wears a sword-belt and sheath, slung over his right shoulder. Round his head is a fillet, tied in a bow with long streamers behind; this fillet also held an olive wreath, of which some twigs still remain, while others are shaken off and scattered over the field. This fillet, as well as all the others, is drawn in purple. He also wears a number of other fillets; some of them are plain, others tied in at intervals to make a succession of ovals, others again of two strands intertwined. The fillets are tied round his body and limbs in various places, — crossing the sword belt from his left shoulder, round his waist, round his left thigh, the top of his right shin, and his right upper arm; these are all plain; the more elaborate kind are placed round his left arm, one hanging down, one waving over from his left hand; there are also wreaths round his left lower arm, his right thigh, and his right wrist, and he holds one in his left hand as well as the sword. On his left ankle is a fetter attached to a couple; the ring attached to the other end of the couple has broken off. On the left is a winged female figure, running away and looking back; she wears a chiton and a himation, which she holds up in front with her right hand; her left hand is extended behind her, its open palm turned downwards. Her head is bound with a small fillet tied in a bow with the ends hanging down. On the right is another female figure advancing as if in dancing step; she wears a spotted chiton and a himation. Her left arm, enveloped in drapery, rests on her hip; her right hand holds up the himation in front; she seems to be grouped in a dancing pose with the man. The winged figure looks at him in astonishment or disdain; she gets out of his way, while the position of her outstretched hand perhaps indicates an imprecation or a curse. The style of the drawing may be appreciated from the accompanying plate, which has been drawn by Mr. F. Anderson. His drawing is made, not directly from the vase, but from a

tracing with the help of several photographs ; but his unrivalled skill and experience in drawing from Greek vases has enabled him to produce a result which appears to be a faithful reproduction of the original.<sup>1</sup>

The drawing on the vase shows the freedom and vigor of design that is characteristic of the period ; the outlines and the principal inner markings are boldly sketched, and show no tendency to refinement and delicacy of detail. Lighter inner markings are used for the abdominal muscles of the principal figure. The hair of the two female figures is rendered in the usual conventional manner, a line of the red ground being left between the black masses of hair and background. That of the man is treated much more freely, and reminds one of the hair on the centaurs of the Harrow vase ; it is painted with brown pigment, and is not in the conventional silhouette, but has the separate curls and tresses indicated. The eyes are in the well-known transitional manner ; though not yet completely in profile, the eyeball is placed slightly to the front, and the inner ends of the eyelids are not joined, so as to give rather the appearance of eyelashes. The insertion of the circle of the iris and a stronger curve of the inner extremity of the eyelid distinguish the eye of the man from those of his two companions. The distinction is really a survival from the difference of the male and female eye in early Attic vases, — a difference that was developed with much subtlety and refinement by vase painters of the cycle of Euphronius.

The interest of the vase lies above all in its subject. At first sight one would suppose that so remarkable and characteristic a scene, which seems almost to tell its own story, ought to be very easy to identify. But I know of no similar type or

<sup>1</sup> Professor Tarbell has kindly compared the drawing with the original, and reports as follows : "There are some omissions and inaccuracies of a trifling nature in the drawing. Thus the expression of the female figure on the right has been slightly distorted by a change in the form of her eye and by the over-emphasis of the two lines near her nose. The drawing of the abdominal markings on the male figure varies noticeably from the original. Other discrepancies are not worth mentioning."

composition on any vase or relief to serve for guidance or comparison; nor of any event described in Greek mythology that exactly fits the conditions here portrayed. Under these circumstances it will be best to begin by enumerating the most essential and peculiar characteristics of the scene, and then we can look out for a myth to which they appear to be appropriate. For the sake of clearness, I put these into a tabular form, to which we can afterwards recur.

(1) The man is evidently in a state of ecstasy, whether induced by temporary excitement or by madness.

(2) He holds a thunderbolt in his hand; yet it is evident that he is not Zeus, and I can quote no example of the thunderbolt being held by any other person.<sup>1</sup> It seems a fair inference that he assumes, at least for the time, the characteristic attribute of Zeus.

(3) He has escaped from captivity, probably by breaking his fetters; for the broken fetter still hangs from his left ankle.

(4) He is bound with fillets and wreaths all over his body and limbs; thus he is evidently marked out as a victim for sacrifice. The custom is common in all kinds of sacrifices, and is especially in the case of human sacrifices in Greece, such as those that took place at the Thargelia.

(5) He holds a sword and appears to threaten some one with it, though it does not look as if either of the two female figures is the object of his attack.

(6) He wears greaves in an extraordinary way, one on his left arm, one on his right leg. I can quote no parallel in literature or art; the arrangement is not one adapted for defence, nor, I believe, is it sufficiently explained as a mere symptom of madness. I have little doubt that it has some definite meaning, if one could only trace what that meaning is.<sup>2</sup> It may have some connection with the commoner practice of having only one foot shod. Students of folk-lore may perhaps be able to throw more light on the question.

(7) One of the female figures is winged — a clew that may help towards her identification; and her attitude may perhaps be explained as symbolizing an imprecation or curse; if so, it is natural to associate it with the frenzy that has fallen upon the man.

Among the known legends of Greece there is none that appears to have so many features in common with our vase as

<sup>1</sup> Except Athena on certain Macedonian coins.

<sup>2</sup> The custom of baring one arm and one leg in the Masonic ceremony of initiation may perhaps be similar; but it is difficult to know whether this is a survival from primitive ritual or not. Professor Percy Gardner suggests that the greave on the left arm may be an imitation of the aegis held in a similar position by Zeus when holding the thunderbolt.

the story of Athamas. There is probably no figure of equal familiarity that has never yet been recognized with probability upon extant monuments; and this is the more remarkable, since he was the subject of plays by all the three great tragic poets. In order to have before us the evidence for comparison, it seems advisable to give a brief summary of the myth of Athamas, so far as it concerns us at present.

Athamas<sup>1</sup> was the chief early hero of the Minyan race, the son of Aeolus, and so the brother of Sisypheus and Salmoneus; he was according to one account the king of Halos in Phthiotis; according to another version, of the Minyan Orchomenus; and a Boeotian genealogy made him the son of Minyas. The first wife of Athamas was the goddess Nephele, and by her he had two children, Phrixus and Helle. His second wife was Ino, by whom he had two sons, Learchus and Melicertes. Ino, in jealousy of her step-children, brought on a famine by inducing the women to roast the seed corn; and then suborned the messenger, sent to consult the oracle at Delphi, to bring back a false response, ordering the sacrifice of Phrixus and Helle. But Nephele saved her children by sending the Ram with the Golden Fleece, on which they escaped over the sea. A variation worth noticing is that Ino was the first wife of Athamas, but that he set her aside and married Nephele at the command of Hera.

The madness of Athamas, in which he slew Learchus, his son by Ino, is usually ascribed to Hera also. According to one account the goddess sent it upon him in anger with Ino; according to another version she sent madness on both Athamas and Ino in vengeance for their nurture of the child Dionysus. Ino and Melicertes leapt into the sea.

Athamas fled from Boeotia, and inquired of an oracle where he might dwell; he was told to wander until he was entertained by wild beasts; this oracle was fulfilled when he found some wolves feeding on a sheep; they fled and left him their prey.

<sup>1</sup> See art. Athamas in Roscher, *Lexikon d. gr. u. röm. Mythologie*, where other references will be found.

This was in Phthiotis, in the district afterward called the Athamantian plain; here he settled and married Themisto, by whom he had children whose names are clearly those of local heroes.

Such is the story as given, with many variations, by later mythologists; some parts of it are evidently invented as explanations, others to harmonize the various local myths of Orchomenus, Halos, and elsewhere. If we had no more than this, we should have but little to connect Athamas with our vase; but fortunately there is preserved something of the local legends themselves, and also a scanty record of the plays founded on them by the Attic dramatists; and these give us more valuable evidence. The local legend of Halos is fortunately given by Herodotus,<sup>1</sup> who says that when Xerxes came to the town, his guides told him the following story about the temple of Zeus Laphystius: "Athamas, the son of Aeolus, plotted with Ino the death of Phrixus; and after that, in accordance with an oracle, the Achaeans set the following ordinance on his descendants. The eldest representative of his family they order to keep away from the Prytaneum, or *λήιτον*, as they call it, and they keep watch on him; and if he enters it, he may not go out again without being destined for sacrifice. And, moreover, many such destined victims have fled in fear to another land; and when they returned in course of time, if they were detected, they were sent to the Prytaneum. And the victim was led out, as is customary in sacrifice, covered all over with fillets, and escorted in procession. And this doom belongs to the descendants of Cytissorus, the son of Phrixus, because, when the Achaeans were making Athamas a propitiatory victim on behalf of the land, recording to an oracle, and were about to sacrifice him, this Cytissorus arrived from Aea in Colchis and rescued him; and by this action he brought the wrath of the god on his descendants."

Another similar custom about this same Minyan family is recorded of Orchomenus, where at the annual feast of the Agri-

<sup>1</sup> VII, 197.



onia the priest of Dionysus Laphystius used to pursue a maiden of the family with a sword, and, if he caught her, he slew her.

Here we are evidently getting at a much more primitive version of the myth of Athamas, and at the same time find several indications to connect it with our vase. Before we discuss these it will be as well to notice also the scanty evidence that we possess about the treatment of the subject in Attic drama; for that treatment is based upon the early and local traditions, not on the later and more artificial forms of the story. Of Aeschylus's *Athamas* we know practically nothing; and this is the more unfortunate, as it may well have been contemporary with our vase. Sophocles wrote two plays on the subject. One of these appears to have been called *Athamas στεφανηφορῶν*; the plot is recorded as follows: Nephele, in vengeance for her children's fate, causes Athamas to be devoted as a victim for sacrifice to Zeus, and he is accordingly led to the altar, bound with wreaths and fillets. He is rescued by Heracles, who announces the escape of Phrixus. The madness of Athamas, and his attack on Ino and her children, may have formed the subject of the second play. Sophocles also wrote a play called *Phrixus*, which dealt with the earlier part of the story; but nothing that is recorded or conjectured about it helps us in the present investigation. Sophocles's *Athamas* is referred to by Aristophanes in *The Clouds* (l. 257), where Strepsiades, when given a wreath, fears he is going to be sacrificed like Athamas; the circumstance is very significant. Euripides also wrote plays upon the subject, with the titles of *Phrixus* and *Ino*; the plots of these plays are probably recorded; but though they are interesting both from the mythological and from the literary point of view, they do not seem to throw any more light upon the scene as represented on our vase. Later dramatists, both Greek and Latin, treated the subject; though we know nothing of their work, they probably contributed towards its reduction to the current version of later mythologists.

If, in the light of the knowledge that we have gained as to

the tale of Athamas, we now return to consider our vase, I think we shall see good reason for identifying at least its principal figure as Athamas himself. But we must begin with the admission that no particular scene in the story of Athamas, as recorded in literature, appears to correspond exactly with the representation on the vase. And, perhaps, such a correspondence was hardly to be expected. When we consider the variety that exists between the different literary versions, and realize also that these different versions probably have arisen to explain certain ancient and obscure customs that survived in Halos, Orchomenus, and other towns, we certainly shall not be surprised to find on a vase a scene which, though connected with the story, does not exactly fit any recorded version of it. In the first place, we must remember that a vase painter does not strictly observe the unities of place and time, but frequently joins together in a single scene what seem to him the essential features of a story, though these may from the very nature of the case have happened successively or in different localities. Thus, if the two things that struck him as most important about the myth of Athamas were the wreathing of the hero for sacrifice and his madness, he would not scruple to represent the two as simultaneous, even though in the story they were consecutive. It is, however, possible that there is no need to fall back upon the convention of the vase painter for an explanation. The sequence may well have existed only in the myth that grew up to explain the custom, and may not have existed in the custom itself; and so the vase painter would be fully justified in representing the various essential features as simultaneous.

Let us now recur to the characteristics that we have already noticed as likely to help in the identification of the scene, and notice how far they correspond with the story of Athamas.

(1) The madness of Athamas is an essential feature in all versions of the story, and is sufficiently obvious on the vase. Its cause, and the form which it took, will have to be considered under other heads.

(2) The impersonation of Zeus, which we have seen to be implied by the attribute of the thunderbolt, is not indeed directly recorded in any version of the Athamas legend; but if we consider that legend in its wider bearings, the explanation is not far to seek. The myth and custom of Halos, in particular, where the eldest of Athamas's house was always liable to be sacrificed to Zeus Laphystius, and where Athamas himself had been destined to be a victim, is unmistakable in its character. We evidently have here an example of the mystic sacrifice of the divine king, so fully investigated by Mr. Frazer in the *Golden Bough*. It is true that here, as in many other cases, the notion of atonement has been grafted on to the more simple and primitive notion, which regards the slaying of the king in full vigor as essential to the maintenance in full vigor of those powers of nature that are immanent in his divine person. But the association with the health of vegetation, especially of crops of corn, is retained in the tradition which refers to the sacrifice both of Athamas and of his eldest son Phrixus. In cases like this the original identity of the king and the god to whom he is sacrificed is abundantly proved by Mr. Frazer; and the fact that a scion of the family of Athamas is offered to Zeus Laphystius at Halos and to Dionysus Laphystius at Orchomenus shows that the rite goes back to a more primitive stage than that in which the orthodox Greek divinities were differentiated. A very close parallel to Athamas is offered by Lycaon, who also sacrifices a child to Zeus, and is smitten with madness and wanders, and is changed into a wolf; and the primitive identity of Lycaon with Zeus Lycaeus is generally admitted; while both at Halos and at Mount Lycaeus the custom survived that a member of the old sacred family should be driven forth to wander. There is probably a similar custom recorded by Plutarch<sup>1</sup> at Chaeronea, where it was called driving out hunger; there it was a slave who was driven away; for the confusion in such cases see Frazer, *Golden Bough*, II, p. 205. Driving away and killing are

<sup>1</sup> *Quaest. Const.* VI, 8.

common alternatives; they are explicable enough when the notion is that of a scapegoat; and may have been transferred to the other human sacrifices that had their origin in the killing of the divine king. If these indications suffice to show us that Athamas must be regarded as originally identical with the Zeus Laphystius to whom, according to the myth, he is offered as a victim, we need not be surprised to find him upon our vase with the especial attribute of Zeus in his hand. It is not, of course, to be imagined that the vase painter realized the mythological significance of Athamas's personality, and thus gave it expression. But he has probably recorded here a feature which was preserved in some custom or tradition that was known to him. And although no such feature is preserved in the myth of Athamas as we now have it, it occurs in the case of his brother Salmoneus, who is said to have imitated the lightning and thunder of Zeus by hurling torches and driving a chariot over brazen plates. It is probable that this story of the usurpation of the attribute of Zeus by Salmoneus owes its origin to some rite or representation in which Salmoneus imitated the thunder or held the thunderbolt,<sup>1</sup> just as Athamas does upon our vase. And the explanation may well be the same in both cases, if Salmoneus as well as Athamas was originally a local deity, who was later looked upon merely as a person who had arrogated to himself the function and attributes that properly belonged to Zeus.

(3) That the man on the vase wears a broken fetter is easily explicable if he is Athamas. For Athamas was bound for sacrifice, and was set free, according to one account, by Heracles, according to another, by his grandson Cytissorus. A parallel example may be found in the way in which Dionysus is bound and breaks his fetters in the *Bacchae*, for that play has been shown by Mr. Bather<sup>2</sup> to be derived from the ritual of the Boeotian Agrionia—the very festival in which the priest of

<sup>1</sup> It is hardly necessary to point out how common such rites are—usually of 'sympathetic magic.' Cf. Frazer, *Golden Bough*, I, p. 13, etc.

<sup>2</sup> *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, XIV, p. 244.

Dionysus Laphystius pursued a maiden of the Minyan race at Orchomenus.

(4) The fillets and wreaths, which show that the man is a victim destined for sacrifice, are peculiarly suitable to Athamas. In the *Clouds* of Aristophanes, when Strepsiades is given a wreath to put on, he exclaims, "What? Are you going to sacrifice me like Athamas?" It is true that the reference here is probably to Sophocles's play *Athamas στεφανηφορῶν*, which must therefore have been brought out not long before the *Clouds*, and so cannot be contemporary with our vase. But the fact that the decking of Athamas with garlands was a prominent feature of the play, and gave it its name, indicates that the practice was especially appropriate to this hero. The reason, perhaps, is that Athamas's death was necessary for the renewed vigor of vegetation, and therefore he was decked with branches like a Jack-in-the-green or other similar characters.<sup>1</sup> But decking with fillets and wreaths for sacrifice is so common and universal a custom that it would not be wise to rest too much weight on this circumstance.

(5) The sword in the hand of the man cannot be exactly paralleled in the story of Athamas. Where the weapon with which he killed Learchus is mentioned it is said to be a bow; but this may well be due to contamination with the story of the madness of Heracles. In the festival of the Agrionia at Orchomenus, a sword is expressly mentioned as the weapon with which the priest of Dionysus Laphystius pursues a Minyan maiden. Now we have seen that Dionysus Laphystius at Orchomenus occupies the same relation to the Athamas myth that Zeus Laphystius occupies at Halos; and it follows that if we are right in the one case in maintaining the original identity of Athamas with the god, we must admit it in the other case also. Athamas, in the legend, appears also both as victim and as sacrificing priest; and so the priest at Orchomenus may be quoted as justifying this detail on the vase.

(6) The strange position of the greaves cannot indeed be

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Frazer, *Golden Bough*, I, p. 247.

explained by the myth of Athamas; but if we regard as analogous the curious custom of wearing one sandal only, the most conspicuous example of this custom in mythology occurs in the case of Jason, the one-sandalled man, who was an Aeolid and a Minyan, and appeared at Iolcos, which is near Halos, on the same Pagasaeon gulf.

(7) If the man be Athamas, it is easy to identify the winged female figure, and to explain her gesture. The goddess Nephele is a prominent figure in all versions of the story, and the symbolism would be appropriate to her. She is represented in literary versions as bringing on the madness of Athamas, or the infatuation that leads to his calamities, whether by her own power or by appealing to Hera. Hera probably has nothing whatever to do with the original story, but is introduced with Dionysus and Heracles from a different source. Nephele, as the original goddess-consort of Athamas, is intelligible enough.<sup>1</sup> Her hand, stretched out palm downwards, implies an imprecation upon him; and it is natural, since she is the cause of his madness, that she should not shrink from his attack. An alternative explanation is to call the winged figure Lyssa, who appears in Euripides's play of the *Madness of Heracles*; but it appears to me to be less probable.

The other female figure, who seems to be flying from Athamas, may possibly be identified as Ino; but it must be admitted that she lacks all distinctive attributes; and Ino, in the legend, is usually represented as carrying the infant Melicertes with her in her flight—a feature which would probably have commended itself to the vase painter, if he had meant to introduce Ino into the scene. The figure on the vase suggests rather the Minyan maiden who used to flee from the sword of the priest in the Orchomenian rite; but her dancing step suggests a mimic flight rather than a real one; and at Orchomenus the flight was in deadly earnest, for the maiden was slain if she was caught. Perhaps there was some

<sup>1</sup> The story of Ixion, Nephele, and Hera probably conceals a similar early god and goddess, afterward misunderstood.

other similar local festival in which the custom of human sacrifice had been softened down to a purely symbolical flight and slaughter; such examples are, of course, extremely common, both in Greece and elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> A custom like this, embodied probably in a festal dance, might well have suggested to the artist the scene as we see it upon the vase.

Thus we see that of the seven points which we have noticed as likely to help us in the identification of the scene, six find an appropriate explanation either in the tale of Athamas himself, in the legends of his nearest kinsmen, or in the rites that were preserved, in connection with his family, in various towns of Boeotia and Phthiotis; on the other hand, there is not one of the seven that suggests any other myth for its explanation. I think, then, that we are justified in giving to this scene the title of 'the Madness of Athamas,' and so adding a new and very interesting picture to the gallery of mythological illustration; for Athamas has never hitherto been identified with certainty upon any Greek vase or relief; though it is possible that, with the help of our vase, he may now be identified elsewhere also. We have already noticed that the picture does not correspond exactly with any recorded moment either of the story itself or of the rites from which the story is derived. It may, however, still be asked what is its exact relation to either the myth or the custom. Are we to imagine the artist as illustrating some hitherto unknown version of the tale, or as preserving for us some scene that he had actually seen enacted in the primitive festival of the Agrionia at Halos, at Orchomenus, or elsewhere? In the light of our knowledge of the conventions of Greek vase painters, I do not think that we shall accept either of these two alternatives as a full explanation. The artist was evidently familiar with the story; it is possible even that he may have been acquainted with its treatment in the *Athamas* of Aeschylus, though the plays of Sophocles and Euripides were certainly not produced until long after this vase was painted.

<sup>1</sup> See Frazer, *Golden Bough*, I, p. 242 sqq.

But the existence of all these plays, and also of the passage in Herodotus, shows that the subject was familiar, and that it attracted a good deal of interest toward the middle and latter part of the fifth century. Probably also the artist had seen or heard something of the curious local ceremonies that related to the family of Athamas. From his knowledge of the story and the custom, he constructed the scene we have now before us, and he has included in it what seemed to him the essential features of the myth, or such a selection from them as suited the conditions of the vase painting he designed. It is therefore impossible to fix, with modern precision, the exact moment or action of the scene ; but almost all its characteristic features can be interpreted, and its reference to the myth of Athamas can thus be ascertained.

ERNEST GARDNER.